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SPEAKING TOMBS

By Marieke Visser

Last month Jodensavanne was added to the world monuments list of 100 most endangered sites 2000-2001 of World Monument Watch. The prestigious listing signifies the historical value and international recognition of the site. One must ask if Jodensavanne is to be regarded as a potentially great tourist attraction, a unique piece of history, or nothing more than a heap of bricks & some tombstones in a cleared patch of jungle? The answer rises – after translation – from the graves themselves. "Pain instead of song I brought."

"Flour, I need more flour!" The word 'flour' leads to a lot of commotion at the old Jewish cemetery at Jodensavanne. When the sack of flour is brought the normally quiet and introverted Aviva Ben-Ur is totally ecstatic. The slender Jewish historian dusts the stones and brushes them softly afterwards. The white powder that stays behind in the grooves and lines makes it easier to decipher the inscriptions. A child, David Rodrigues Monsanto, slain by the hand of rebellious slaves. The stone uncovers a part of Suriname's history. Suddenly the knowledge that once a flourishing Jewish colony was found here, that the Cordon Path (a military defense trail, to protect the plantations from attacks by runaway slaves) had its starting point here, that people lived and died here, suddenly all this becomes much more substantial.

Surrealistic. What inspires people to spend long days working cheerfully between tombs, in a cleared, cut open piece of jungle, more or less fifty kilometers south of Paramaribo? Under the scorching sun, a web of fluorescent pink lint marks the grid: the roster on which architect Philip Dikland and 'Jodensavanne crazy' Marnix Visser worked very hard. Their hard labor, their plowing and sweating, resulted in a beautiful map with exact stated coordinates. In these surrealistic surroundings, balancing over tombstones on an unstable construction of two ladders and a board, Patrick Brunings photographs all 452 numbered graves. The ghosts from the past must feel well spirited about the work that is done here: it seems a miracle that Brunings finished the job without any physical injuries. He has to move his acrobatic act from one spot to another all the time, depending on the position of the sun. Each stone is photographed dry, then sprayed wet and recorded on film again; thanks to the thin layer of water the words become much more legible.

The photos will be added to the documentation of the Jewish-American architect Rachel Frankel and Ben-Ur. The inscriptions will be transcribed as accurately as possible, and if possible, decoded in situ. In a later stage, the epitaphs will be translated and the meaning of the symbols will be explained.

Frankel has done a very impressive piece of work of documenting Suriname's Jewish history. In 1995 she visited Suriname for the first time. Impressed by the ancient settlement she came back in 1997, accompanied by a group of professionals who volunteered their services via Caribbean Volunteers Expeditions (CVE). They assisted Frankel in her field study of what is known as the ruin of the oldest synagogue of architectural significance in both America's: Beracha ve Shalom (Blessing and Peace) built in 1685. Last year Frankel returned, this time to map the cemetery of Cassipora, only one kilometer upstream from Jodensavanne. This year she couldn't be here and Ben-Ur and the Surinamese amateur historian Adriana van Alen-Koenraad coordinated the project. Ben-Ur was very enthusiastic about the shared efforts: joint forces from Suriname, United States and Holland, both of Jewish and non-Jewish descent. The intention is that in the future the gathered information becomes available and accessible to the public.

Forever entrusted. Brooms, sacks of flour, hand brushes, rakes, machetes, plant sprayers, small buckets of water: it is a busy going and coming of things and people. But when sundown comes nobody wants to

leave, 'one last photo', 'one more measurement', 'one more form to fill in'. Everybody uses other words to tell what his or her motivation is, but the importance of keeping and baring a unique piece of history is evident for everybody. Sarah Patterson, Peace Corps volunteer for the Foundation for Nature Conservation Suriname (Stinasu): "The people who are buried here showed us the way, we follow in their steps. It is good to preserve that, to learn from it and show respect."

'Pain instead of song I brought' it says on the tombstone of a young mother who died during childbirth. It makes one feel melancholic to think that two centuries ago people would have been gathered round her grave, as sad as one would be today. Forever entrusted to the Surinamese soil. Marty Zimmerman, student and volunteer for CVE, on what he believes to be the story behind the stones: "I don't think that life then was all that different from life nowadays. They just looked for a safe haven, a safe place to stay: a home." Marnix Visser shouts: "But of course I think about those who are buried here, all the time!"

Last month Jodensavanne was included in the list of World Monument Watch, as one of the one hundred most endangered historical sites of the world. That means international recognition of the historical value. For people interested in Jewish history it is almost a sacred place. Or is it just a pile of bricks, some graves in the jungle, not worth the maintaining and rehabilitating the place? That is the choice Suriname has to make (and has made clearly in the last months, MV) now. The Foundation for Jodensavanne, active again since last year after a long dormant period, operates under the leadership of Chairman Guido Robles. Robles has done a lot of work in the last months, in close collaboration with the citizens of the Amerindian village Redi Doti nearby Jodensavanne. Jodensavanne is cleared, cleaned and maintained by the inhabitants of Redi Doti. Also under Robles, a pier has been built and an info center erected. Tickets have been printed and a brochure is being prepared. The nomination on the prestigious world monument list is valid for two years. An important component of the listing is the grant seeking assistance the World Monuments Fund provides its listed sites. Jodensavanne seeks funding for maintaining, conserving and making accessible its historic/sacred sites. Of great importance is to keep the vegetation at bay so as to avoid its repeated take-over as has happened in years past due to lack of maintenance funding.

Skeptic. "When will Jodensavanne be open for the public?" is the question of an American volunteer who just helped with the research on the Beth Haim (House of Life) as a cemetery is known in Hebrew. Not understanding Guido Robles pulls up his brows: "It is open now? I'm not sure what you mean?" The international interest has never been more real than now. But when one looks with the eyes of a modern-day tourist at the accessibility and the way the monument has been maintained up until now, one better understands the volunteer's question. The volunteer explains: "I mean, when is Jodensavanne going to be more open?" In any case, a better road is a big priority. "This is no road - this is an experience!" With heavy rainfall the traveler gets the feeling that driving to Jodensavanne is like driving through a washed away riverbed.

At the moment the gates are not yet manned, tickets are only sold in Suriname's capital, Paramaribo, and information is not available at the Info Center. The waiting is for a meeting with the new Board of the Foundation for Development Redi Doti and Pierre Kondre (SORP). With the inhabitants a decision will be made on how Jodensavanne should best be exploited. "We haven't come this far to let it fail after all." Many people are skeptical and do not share Robles' optimism. Since almost all the inhabitants of Jodensavanne left the community after a great fire in 1832, this is the fifth try to get Jodensavanne back on the map again. The first try was in 1906, then during the Second World War between 1942-1946, after that during an action of the Armed Forces in Suriname (TRIS) in 1967. At the beginning of the seventies the Foundation for Jodensavanne was founded and they cleared the site for visitors. And now another shot is taken, after the disastrous years of the civil war.

There are plans to get experts over to Suriname in order to advise the Foundation on (amongst other subjects) the best way to preserve the cemetery. At this moment the foundation of what probably once was a mortuary were uncovered. Also the medicinal well – a bamboo tube from which humus rich ground water springs – as well as the Creole Freeholders' cemetery where descendants of slaves have found eternal peace have been made more accessible. Robles: What is cleared now, we'll maintain. In the meantime we will not clear more spots (which are lying there in the jungle everywhere around you, MV). In the plans for the

future is the idea to work on the whole village and its surroundings, maybe to rebuild re-erect some of the buildings."

The way it is now, the visitor of the site must either have a very vivid and lively imagination, or get a very good explanation by someone who knows the area and feels at ease with it. For example: it makes a visit to the Creole cemetery more valuable when one knows that the heart shaped symbols on the grave markers are 'sankofa's': African symbols that stand for the wisdom in learning from the past to build for the future.

Playing children. During some decades Jodensavanne must have been a very rich community. According to David Nassy's 1788 essai the area beheld in 1700 more or less forty plantations (where mostly sugar cane was raised), where 500 Jews and 9000 slaves lived. Already in 1683, when the first Governor of Suriname boated up the Suriname-river Jodensavanne was prosperous. Van Sommelsdijck found twenty-five houses and a fortress in Paramaribo, one hundred houses in Torarica (at that time the capital of Suriname) and in Jodensavanne, sixty houses.

The graves speak to one's imagination, as does the serene quiet that rules at the end of the afternoon, and with the coming of the first sunrays. Now you can overlook the river from the hill again – and vice versa, see the synagogue from the river – now a boarding pier makes the site a whole lot better accessible from the water again, it is easier to imagine how it used to be. There was the spot where the first big group of Jews came to settle in 1664. Within a few years this hill had grown in to a village.

Would Abigail Henriquez de Granada have been happy, or would she sometimes have been standing looking out over the river, with an unquiet heart, longing for farther horizons? Would Abraham Mendes Vais have thought with homesickness of his place of birth Livorno, in Italy? The noise of playing children or a company that just arrived with their tent boat would have stopped people in their melancholic broodings and reminiscences in those days.

"Mrs. Van Alen, Mrs. Van Alen?" The photographer tries to get the attention of the logistic leader of the expedition. "Don't disturb me! Can't you see I'm busy with my darling!" For Adriana van Alen-Koenraad no thing is too much, like a mother she watches over the group. But when she's busy with the grave of David Cohen-Nassy, nobody may distract her.

Nassy is the supposed author of the book 'History of the Colony of Suriname. Compiled by a company of learned Jewish men there.' From this in 1791 published document a wealth of information has been saved. Van Alen's darling was the owner of Plantation De Tulpenburg, between Torarica and The Guinee Friendship. "That's a half day travel by boat to go to the synagogue, with one of those elegant tent boats you'll see in the engravings. When you know one wasn't allowed to work after Friday sunset, they were probably busy all Friday getting to Jodensavanne in time for the Sabbath. That's something I'll ponder on, how that must have been. I can't even explain it to my children!" van Alen sighs.

Spirits of salt. A very moving life David Cohen Nassy had. His plantation went bankrupt, he worked as a self-educated pharmacist, and he lost his dearly loved wife Esther in a smallpox epidemic. A love poem on her final resting-place says all of his feelings: "...your memory grows dearer without pain..." the inscription on Nassy's grave is difficult to read. The story goes that someone, during an amateur cleaning action worked with spirits of salt. Strong evidence however is lacking. But more stories are being told about Jodensavanne. Gravestones are said to have disappeared, or moved. Most likely these are fairytales. As far as the inventory that has been made up now, nothing seems to be missing. The whispered secrets about buried treasures and hidden valuables are probably nothing more than the result of a lively imagination. Or maybe they concern the foundations and remains of a rich past that are now lying entangled in Mother Natures loving arms.